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Books of The Times

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Does Russia Have a Future?

By JOHN LEONARD

THE NEW RUSSIAN TRAGEDY. By Anatole Shub. Foreword by Benjamin Bradlee. 128 pages. A Washington Post Book. Norton. $4.50

MESSAGE FROM MOSCOW. By "An Observer." 288 pages. Knopf. $5.95.

THESE two books complement each other perfectly, and yet the reader is likely to finish them more confused than he began. If the Soviet Union has entered a neo-Stalinist phase—both books think so; the jailing of writers and the invasion of Czechoslovakia certainly point in that direction—how long will it last? Who is to blame? What will be the consequences?

Anatole Shub feels that some sort of social explosion is inevitable. The former managing editor of The New Leader and associate editor of Commentary became Moscow correspondent for the Washington Post in April, 1967. Two years later he was expelled for "anti-Soviet" writing. "The New Russian Tragedy" is based on 10 articles he wrote subsequently for his newspaper.

"The men who deposed Nikita Khrushchev in 1964," he says at the outset, "are cynical, crude, narrow-minded, frightened for their own privileges. . . . [They] have turned increasingly to repression and reaction, xenophobia and mystification. They appear to be counting on the fears and prejudices of the 'dark people,' the traditional mob of Russia's tragic history—and they are plunging the country's finest spirits into despair."

A Study and Side Glances

His account is directed principally to an examination of these men—Brezhnev, Suslov, Shelepin, Grechko, Andropov, etc.—and the mechanisms by which they rule, with penetrating side glances at the frustrations of a foreign journalist in Moscow: the rise of miliatry influence on policy-making; the plight of Russian intellectuals, and the omnipresence of the K.G.B. His analyses of Soviet economic policy, the events leading up to Czechoslovakia and the interlocking structure of party congress, Central Committee, Politburo and Secretariat are particularly lucid.

Mr. Shub may be presumed to have taken with him to Moscow an ideological distaste for Soviet Communism. He notes in passing that an Izvestia attack on him caled his father an "arrant Trotskyite," whereas David Shub, who escaped to the United States in 1908 from Siberian exile, "had detested Trotsky even more than he had mistrusted Lenin. . . ." He sees the Soviet Union in a "pre-revolutionary phase" that could conclude abruptly with a border war with China or "a riot in a Moscow butcher shop."

"An Observer," on the other hand," came to Moscow as a student, with some sympathy for the Socialist fatherland. His book consists of eloquent Russian voices in counterpoint to an inquiry into his own love-hate relationship with the country. "Message From Moscow" is rich in human dimension, but profoundly gloomy about politics.

Eat, Talk and Dance

Indeed, after three years in the Soviet Union, "Observer" seems to have come down with a bad case of Russian fatalism. He begins by being shocked at Russian apathy over the invasion of Czechoslovakia and ends, after a brilliant account of intellectual alienation and self-disgust, with a bottle of vodka, a pair of skis and a Russian girl (according to his report, they are incorrigibly promiscuous)—not caring.

No matter who rules Russia, he feels, a thousand years of political and cultural backwardness will defeat the best of intentions. Yes, Soviet rule is "repressive and obscurantist"; Orwell was right; things are awful. But, says "Observer," Russians are politically passive, uninterested in foreign affairs, dedicated simply to staying alive and having an occasional good time. "Winter's oppression plays a much greater role in daily Russian life than the dictatorship." We are powerless, so why not eat, talk and dance?

"Observer," with his case histories, his samples of gallows humor, his novelist's eye and self-examination, cuts deeper than Mr. Shub. But it is frightening to think that, at a time when ignorant armies clash by atomic light, anybody believes he can still be true to Matthew Arnold, or Omar Khayyam, can throw a party in the bloody night or build a nest in the nearest crater.